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MAHAL
an artistic exploration of
the desires which carry the
filipino/o across borders

To culminate a series of events organised by the UBC Philippine Studies Series¹ with
guest lecturer, Dr Vicente L. Rafael, an art exhibit entitled MAHAL was held at the YACTAC
gallery from October 28 to November 4, 2011. The name of the exhibit was inspired as such:

In his book White Love (2000), Vicente L. Rafael considers the Filipino word
‘mahal’ as a translation for the word ‘love’. It refers to that which is dear,
but also means valuable and expensive. Rafael writes that such ambiguities
express love as a promise of fulfilment –and a costly one.

Artists were invited to submit their interpretations of what constitutes such desires, and
what a 'border’ signifies relating to their reflections on Filipino transnationals.

Both as a co-curator and a participating artist in MAHAL, this paper is written as a
post-exhibit reflective analysis of the processes I engaged with in this project: (1)
interpreting the theme as expressed in the submissions, (2) designing the space to narrate
the whole collection, and (3) witnessing the dynamic ways a Filipino transnational
community is re-created in Vancouver through MAHAL. This paper is structured in these
three sections accordingly. The reflections conveyed in this paper come from my own
direct experiences, which are then interwoven with analyses put forward by Filipino artists
and scholars of transnationalism. Through discussions with my co-curator, and
conversations with artists and guests, this paper attempts to be inclusive of the wide

¹ The UBC Philippine Studies Series (PSS) is a project funded by the Liu Institute for Global Issues in
the University of British Columbia. Its team of students work to organize platforms catering to
academic work, community action and art which would promote the discussion of Philippine issues
within UBC and the larger Vancouver community.
variety of experiences created by MAHAL, but is careful not to claim authority over these individual experiences.

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MAHAL explores the desires which carry the Filipino/a across borders.

Curated by Patrick Cruz and Chaya Go.

Presented by the UBC Philippine Studies Series and the Liu Institute for Global Issues.

![Map of the gallery](image)

**Fig. 1:** Map of the gallery

MAHAL’s guests were provided with copies of this map of the gallery. This cartographic representation spatially narrates the arrangement of the collection, and outlines the names of participating artists along with the titles of their submissions. It is the physical community that convened within these walls, and the connections that link them
to the wider Filipino community in Vancouver, and overseas to the Philippines, which form the subject of study for this paper.

**Introduction**

In a 2001 report by Statistics Canada, Filipinos were surveyed to be the third largest non-European ethnic group in the country with almost 328,000 people of Filipino origin living in Canada, representing 1.1% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada 2007). After a three-year community-based research conducted by the National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada (NAPWC), with the support of Multiculturalism Canada, it is also reported that “[Filipinos] are among the most educated of immigrant groups, but are also among those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy” (2009, 5). This is supported by Statistics Canada’s report that “[Filipinos’] representation was disproportionately low among those holding management positions, as well as those employed in education, government and the social sciences” (2007). It is estimated that 65% of all Filipinos in Canada are women, most of which came through The Live-In-Caregiver Programme, and its predecessor, the Foreign Domestic Movement, as managed under the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) (NAPWC 2009, 5). Many Filipinos also find entry through the Temporary Foreign Worker programme. The increasing feminisation of Philippine migration to Canada, along with the continuing growth of the Filipino community in the country, have led to the birth of civic organisations such as the NAPWC which aims “to develop capacity and initiatives for action that would strengthen [Filipino-Canadians’] capability for social change and civic participation” (NAPWC 2009, 3).
In his book *The Third Asiatic Invasion*, Baldoz explains that this migration flow to North America is situated within the deeper and larger “entanglement of immigration, empire and citizenship”, starting when Filipinos first became U.S. ‘nationals’ in 1898, an anomalous limbo between citizenship and alienage which allowed for Filipinos to both enter the U.S. and yet be estranged by race (2011, 9). With *White Love*, Rafael in turn follows a mass migration to North America which began in the mid-1960s and continues to the present where the search for alternatives is still fuelled by “uneven developments and unrealised desires in the Philippines” (2000, 2). Like in the poetics of the book title ‘white love’, the lure of the American Dream for Filipinos continues –it is, however, often savoured in the imagination in spite of the difficult struggles lived by Filipinos overseas.

Positioned within civic and activist networks stands UBC PSS. Recognising itself as a contributor to the work of supporting the Filipino community in Canada, UBC PSS strives to create a variety of venues for discussing issues relating to the Philippines on and off the university campus. In addition to NAPWC, UBC PSS has also been supported by the weekly “Tinig Ng Masa” (Voice of the Masses) programme on Vancouver Co-operative Radio 102.7FM, which tackles issues affecting the Philippine-Canadian community. “Balitang Vancouver” (Vancouver News), a television programme that shows twice a week on the Shaw Multicultural Channel, also supports the work of UBC PSS. Through these solidarities, UBC PSS brought MAHAL together.

On October 22, 2011, Cruz and I, as curators of the exhibit, were invited for an interview on Tinig Ng Masa to invite listeners to the opening of MAHAL in line with the day’s discussion on colonialism and its effects on contemporary Philippine migration,
labor and culture. We recounted how the Philippines’ staggering foreign debt has facilitated this dependency on foreign remittances since President Marcos’ Labour Export Policies in the 1970s. Today the Philippine diaspora is one of the largest in the world; the number of migrant Filipino workers still ranks high among all other countries, with men mostly as seafarers and construction workers, and women as domestic workers and nannies (Rodriguez 2002). Transitioning from systemic and structural analyses of colonial, including post- and neo-colonial economic exploitations of the Philippines, and into the purpose of MAHAL, I shared, “We also, however, need to see how people, on an individual level, in personal and intimate ways, respond to [these marginalising forces]” (Tinig Ng Masa October 22 17:00 2011).

‘Kamalayan’, the Filipino word for ‘awareness’ or ‘consciousness’ became a key point in the discussion. Edsel Yu-Chua, one of the two radio hosts and also a contributing artist in MAHAL, says it is not enough for a Filipino to say, “To go to the U.S. –that’s my dream!” Yu-Chua elaborates on the need to promote discourse, to know, and to tease apart the stuff that constitutes this ‘Filipino desire’ or ambitions (“Kailangan nating himayin yung mga pangarap natin”). With kamalayan, or ‘conscientisation’ (conscientização) as Brazilian revolutionary educator, Paolo Freire, would propose, can the oppressed liberate themselves –to ultimately step beyond this oppressor-oppressed power inequality.

Cruz adds that there is an equal need to critically understand ‘Filipinos’ place in the world’, and the consequent ‘status of our culture’ in this day and age –with this he alludes to

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2 “The term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 2009, 35). Ultimately, Freire underscores that it is this deepened awareness of one’s reality and the strengthened ability to transform it is the purpose of education. In many ways, UBC PSS frames its projects to be pedagogical for all its participants.
a critique of Filipinos’ aspiration for Western capitalist markers, allowing for a ‘cultural loss’ as Cruz refers to the extinction of *alibata*, a pre-colonial writing system in the Philippines which is both a language and a visual art form. The importance of MAHAL, as Jon Nieto, our other radio host reflects on and which UBC PSS’s intention agrees with, is in how art is given the opportunity to serve as another tool for documenting Filipinos’ experiences moving from the Philippines to come ‘here’.

**The Art and the Artists**

The icon of the box [Fig 2.a] is used in the MAHAL poster and invitation cards. It is recognisable to Filipinos as the *balikbayan* (homecoming) box – a container of material wealth accumulated by overseas Filipinos over a period of time, and sent home to be distributed among kin and even neighbours. The ethnographic film by Docot, Walde and Smartt, *“Balikbayan: Return to the Nation”* (2011) [Fig 2.b], gives face to this tradition as practised by Filipinos in Metro Vancouver. Screened for the first time in public, *“Balikbayan”* was projected on a curtain-wall in MAHAL. Resembling the rectangular shape of a framed picture, the film was positioned seamlessly with the other narratives told in the gallery. The projector’s low level invited guests to sit on the wooden ‘Isla/Border’ [#10 in Fig 1] to view it – an instantaneously humbling experience for the viewer as s/he hunches a little to watch poignant details of migrants’ hands smoothing the edges of boxes, wrapping and labelling each item to pack in the box while nostalgic tales of home are told on camera. Viewers partake in these sentiments combining an overseas worker’s pride in her ability to provide materially for her family, and her loneliness in being separated from them. Constable writes about such emotions in her ethnography on Filipinas’ narratives of
“ambivalent returns” (1999) where a complexity of emotions combine a Filipina’s de/attachment to familial relations and her newfound independence abroad. This peculiar mix of delight and sadness as expressed by Filipina workers in Constable’s recorded interviews is granted visibility by the facial expressions, intonations and bodily gestures intimately captured by the film.

A Filipino transnational’s self-reflexive investigation on identity and nationhood is embodied in Michael Africa’s diptych paintings, “Untitled (Head Haunted)” [Fig 3]. Referencing his work on old ethnographic photographs of hunted heads among the Ifugao in the Cordillera Province, Philippines, Africa paints strong and heavy representations of two heads in deep, dark shades. In place of the crania are fragmented portions of the Philippine islands. The paintings echo ideas analysed by Rafael in his chapter “The Undead” (2000) on photographs taken of the Philippines during American colonialism, and Gonzales’ investigation of Americans’ “visual production of the ‘native’ within colonial, ethnographic and tourist imaginaries” (2009, 145). Gonzales writes that ‘ethnic tourism’ in a Cordilleran village of the Ifugao today “embody colonial trajectories of discovery, conquest, conversion and display” (146). Rafael, Gonzales and Africa, however, subvert this ‘foreign’ gaze on the ‘local’. Perhaps as Filipinos outside the Philippines, transnationals are privileged with an ability and perspective to do so. As a painter, Africa reverts this same process of creating a visual record of an ‘other’, not to represent another, but instead to encounter his own ‘self’.

This theme of reconnecting or returning to one’s distant ‘origins’, ‘home’, ‘roots’, ‘ancestry’, and ‘history’, is also expressed in my submission, “Ancients” [Fig 4], and in Spencer Ocampo’s triptych, “Overlook” [Fig 5]. This recall and revisit of Philippine
indigenous cultural motifs is seen in Ocampo’s fashion illustrations and my portrait of contemporary Filipina musician, Grace Nono, who is the muse for Philippines indigenous arts and community development. While balikbayan boxes are sent home for overseas workers to reunite with their families in a manner of a phantasmic reunion, the connections evoked by “Ancients” and “Overlook” are also illusory and highly imaginative. As Ocampo’s title suggests, in people’s pursuit of their desires, an essential matter is ‘overlooked’ and needs to be revisited. In contemplating this break between ‘modernity’ and an ‘ancient past’, I call to mind Appadurai’s argument for “the work of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” wherein mass media and migration enable for the “construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds” (1996, 3). It is the transnational subjectivity which Ocampo and I share with other artists, and our interaction with media-archived representations of ‘antiquity’ and ‘indigeneity’, which propel us to create novel and imagined relations with our ‘original selves’.

The arranged letters in my installation spell Spanish words into a poem entitled “Las Islas Filipinas” which is my recreation of an imagined ‘home’, the Philippine islands. These letters flow over to the adjacent wall where Francisco-Fernando Granados’ rectified ready made t-shirt hangs with the text “I ♥ CANADA” printed on it [Fig 6]. A subtle contrast is sensed between these two texts made of the same Latin alphabet, although one is for poetics and the other for commercial merchandise. Ocampos’ paintings and Granados’ t-shirt, although both are on clothing, also create an interesting juxtaposition as Ocampo painted elaborate layers and ornamental details, while the other is a basic rectangle with arm and neck holes. A critique of ‘Westernisation’, ‘commercialisation’ and ‘capitalism’ is subtly evoked in these contrasts as Filipino artists favour ‘tradition’ and ‘spirituality’
associated with local Philippine culture, over the instant gratifications of cosmopolitanism. Ironically, Filipino migrants and overseas workers leave the Philippines primarily for the latter, which represent material and economic ‘development’. As the Filipino word MAHAL succinctly conveys, it is that which is expensive which is also coveted. The ♥-shaped hole Granados traces out of the t-shirt inquires into the negative space vacated by migrants in their originating countries. As a Guatemalan conceptual artist in Toronto, Granados alludes to a shared understanding of this ‘south-to-north’ global migration flow with Filipinos. His reflections on the emotive shape (♥) and space of a nation-state can be likened to the geographic cartographic lines painted by Africa on the heads and the map I drew behind Grace Nono’s portrait.

In our interview on Vancouver Co-operative Radio, Cruz and I reflect on MAHAL artists’ use of ‘Filipino’ cultural markers and icons which Filipinos can identify with. These symbols are almost cliché and yet artists have simultaneously abstracted and deconstructed them playfully (Tinig Ng Masa October 22 17:00 2011). Reva Diana’s painting “Inheritance” [Fig 7] and Cruz’s sculpture “Rebulto” (shrine) [Fig 8] do exactly this. Diana’s subject is a typical 'Maria Clara', a Filipina mestiza in Spanish colonial times who has also become the archetype for a Western-educated and Catholic ancestry. A cross, however, erases her face. This same cross is the foundation for Cruz’s sculpture, which has been layered on, decorated, and consequently deformed with plaster, paint and other found items. Both artists engage in postmodernist projects to challenge the Christian cross which has become ubiquitous in Filipino society and yet also a figure of patriarchal and institutional oppressions. While Africa, Ocampo, Granados and I perceive MAHAL as a
space to re-evoke imagined origins, Diana and Cruz perceive MAHAL as a space to challenge conventional hallmarks of the Philippines and the Filipino.

A painting of a fallen surfer caught in a big wave is the subject of Roberto Jamora's painting, which he similarly entitled "Mahal" [Fig 9]. The silence of this image contributes to its poignancy and mystery – an anonymous male caught in a frozen moment, a de-contextualised limbo, who could have been washed away by his desires or who may be surrendering gracefully to a profound unknown. Jamora who is based in New York sent his submission to Vancouver on courier, and quite literally surrendered the meaning of his work to the larger MAHAL collection. His painting, along with the other visual submissions, were given another narrative layer through Edsel Yu-Chua’s recorded poetry “Perya” (carnival) and Ocampo’s sound collage “Overlook”. The audio recording of Yu-Chua’s family reciting his satirical poem in Filipino on the topic of migration and the ‘American Dream’, along with Ocampo’s electronic composition of Filipino indigenous musical instruments, were played in a loop throughout MAHAL’s opening, granting another choral layer to the stories of Filipinos crossing borders.

Flows in the Gallery

As curators, Cruz and I designed the gallery with intentions. Africa later shares with me through an email that one of the guests was shocked to learn that contributing artists and curators did not meet in person to discuss the exhibit since the call for submissions was done virtually through Facebook (October 30, 2011). Putting MAHAL together in two weeks without personal contact, Cruz and I communicated with each other and artists from across many geographic border-zones – the UBC campus, the city of Vancouver, Toronto,
New York, the Philippines - as facilitated by the Internet and mass media. Once the art submissions were delivered to YACTAC gallery, Cruz and I worked to narrate the collection cohesively, relying on imagined meaningful associations and aesthetic considerations to arrange the gallery. Physical dimensions were first addressed; however, ‘dialogue’ between pieces was our topmost priority to allow for discourse and tensions within the collection to surface without first-hand instructions from artists.

Borrowing from Matthews’ article on *Bayanihan Transition*, “a two-year series of public installations investigating the Filipino immigration experience in San Francisco Bay Area” (1998, 115), the Filipino word ‘*bayanihan*’ is also an apt metaphor for the mobilisation of MAHAL. *Bayanihan* is the traditional custom among Filipino farming communities wherein kin, neighbours and even strangers help a farmer physically move his nipa hut home to another field. This image of coordinated cooperation among community members is nostalgic of a rustic way of life in the Philippines, and yet *bayanihan* is also the Filipino’s modern-day migratory practice. The individual migrant remains reliant on the ‘support’ of extended families overseas, on agents and multiple networks s/he has associated with, although these relations are not necessarily congenial and may be deceitful. The *bayanihan* spirit, however, exists in Internet and media-facilitated communities just as MAHAL was a productive collaboration among kin, friends and strangers. Just as *Bayanihan Transition* was an exploration of deterritorialisation and nomadism, where “a malleable self is perpetually migrating, adept at shifting between worlds, able to embrace contradiction and inhabit multiple dimensions simultaneously” (Ibid., 116), MAHAL has also explored the nomadism of Filipino transnationals, who, interestingly, are able to congregate to create in communal public spaces.
Diana’s “Inheritance” was the entrance piece to MAHAL – we set a Filipina archetype to begin the narrative. Africa’s large diptych served as ‘bookends’ to hold the rest of the smaller visual pieces together between two walls. The text from the “Ancients” installation flows across a doorframe to the adjacent wall leading to Granados’ t-shirt. Ocampo’s triptych follows, with Cruz’s sculpture standing on the floor, and Jamora’s painting was hung above it. The wooden “Isla/Border” becomes a physical diagonal divide across the room to direct flow and counter-flow, and also to serve as a bench for guests to view pieces at a distance or watch the film. The documentary becomes a real grounding force for the earlier art pieces, which are fairly abstracted re-imaginings of ‘roots’, ‘home’ and ‘heritage’, as “Balkibayan” provides actual faces and stories, like evidence to prove the ‘real’ struggles of Filipino migrant workers. The audio pieces in turn serve as an enveloping presence in the gallery, a combination of voices speaking in Filipino and indigenous musical instruments, reminding guests they have now entered an alternate zone of ‘cultural reality’ albeit momentarily.

A low wooden desk is propped near the entrance with pens and a stack of index cards arranged on top of it. As guests arrived during the opening reception, I provided each with a gallery map and alerted them to the cards which they could write on as they moved through the gallery space. As the desk quite humorously greeted guests at their first step in, friends teased me that it served as the exhibit’s “immigration desk” – I laughed, and realised that it was one of the many metaphors in the gallery relating to migratory borders and flows.
Each card was printed with a question which served as a further prompt or guide for guests as they reflected on MAHAL. The following are sample responses selected from cards with written words (as others had drawn images):

What travels?
“Every tree in the forest is different but each one reaches for the light."

What gets left behind?
“Home is where the Heart is" so for some the heart itself is left behind.

What gets left behind?
People sacrifice so much for so long in order to give their loved ones the best. One of the most selfless people I’ve ever come across. I’ve felt like the t-shirt myself on a few occasions...

What do Filipina/os want?
I don’t know. I want to hold their hands.

These responses express empathy, an affective understanding for the desires which carry the Filipino/a across borders. One confesses that s/he “does not know” what Filipino/as look for, but to “want to hold their hands” already reconciles the cultural differences assumed in peoples’ desires. As travellers themselves, or foreigners in Vancouver, or having known migrants and temporary foreign workers here, our guests understood that it is a desire for something ‘better’, for the ‘light’, which is the underlying motivation moving human beings to move across borders. Ocampo shares with us the term “Anthro-Kinetics” he coined in relation to the theme of his larger portfolio –“from great migrations to the blinking of one’s eye, we want to find out what moves us” (Betawave X, 2011).

Reflecting on the flows in the gallery, MAHAL also echoes the work of an exhibit hosted at the UBC Museum of Anthropology entitled “BORDERZONES” from January 23 to September 12, 2010. Karen Duffek, the curator, writes, “In this exhibition, twelve artists look at the idea of borders: not only as lines that divide, but also as spaces of encounter and
exchange, protection and exclusion, migration and memory” (2010). Indeed MAHAL has become a similar space where “new narratives are being created as cultural and geographical borders diverge and collide” (Ibid.). MAHAL does not just mark geopolitical boundaries crossed by Filipino transnationals, or the simple vacating of the Philippines to be elsewhere, but MAHAL most importantly showcases samples of contemporary cultural practice borne from a Filipino’s ability today to inhabit multiple bases and identities simultaneously.

The wooden desk with cards in MAHAL is surprisingly a miniature of Edward Poitras’ large-scale installation of “Cell”3 in BORDERZONES—the imagery of an immigration desk policing people’s entry, along with their baggage of desires, seems central to the south-north migratory narrative. Cruz’s “Rebulto” invited guests to stoop low and examine the details of a cross, not to miss the mirror which reflects the guest’s own view. In the same way Marianne Nicolson’s “Wanx’id: to hide, to be hidden”4 in BORDERZONES invited guests to peer into black glass boxes where First Nations’ photographs and carvings are illumined. Both artists create to reveal things ‘hidden’, implying that the act of seeking occurs in movement such as peering in or squatting down. Another parallel is between Yu-Chua and John Wynne who both evoke the power of spoken word. As Wynne’s sound and photographic installation “Anspayaxw”5 recorded speakers of the endangered Aboriginal language, Gitxsanimaax, Yu-Chua also brought to our ears the sound of Filipino as a minority language ‘endangered’ by Taglish (Tagalog-English) and English with the continued aspiration for the West.

3 http://moa.ubc.ca/borderzones/poitras3.html#words
4 http://moa.ubc.ca/borderzones/nicolson3.html#words
5 http://moa.ubc.ca/borderzones/wynne3.html#words
The parallels between MAHAL and BORDERZONES exemplify how “contemporary art is increasingly significant as a site where cultural differences and values are both produced and contested” (Duffek 2010). Using art to inquire into zones of cultural encounter, MAHAL shows how Filipino migrants and overseas workers maintain social relations with the Philippines, subvert Filipino conventions, re-imagine to re-create the ‘Filipino’ in the West, and are both endangered and striving—all of which are shared by other ‘transnationals’ as showcased in BORDERZONES.

Remaking of Community

In addition to the concept of ‘border-zones’, the idea of ‘scapes’ as proposed by Appadurai is also another effective way to think about zones of encounter brought about by globalisation. YACTAC as a gallery space has served the role of such a ‘scape’, a zone of overlap where varying interests in Philippine migration coalesce to form a physical community albeit transient. It is this interesting ability for communities to re-create themselves, diffuse, and re-gather all over again, which interests my analysis of MAHAL as a transnational community.

Ma’am Nora, a Filipina professor in UBC, came to MAHAL’s opening reception with her husband and young daughter. “It’s great this exhibit’s in a house!” a guest remarked, reflecting on the intimacy of the gallery as guests were invited to socialise in the living room next to the exhibit space. Caroline and I were introduced to each other, and to our astonishment, we realised that her balikbayan parents are now renting my parents’ house in Metro Manila. Niem, a Vietnamese raised in Palawan, Philippines, amazed everyone with his impeccable Tagalog. The founder of a Vietnamese students association, Niem was endlessly teased by Filipinos to ‘switch over’ to our side. Mable Elmore, the current MLA for Vancouver-Kensington, is known among the Filipino-Canadian

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6 In the context of BORDERZONES the word ‘transnational’ also refers to First Nations peoples in British Columbia whose struggles for self-determination reflect their ambivalent status in the nation-state they are supposedly citizens of.
community and she came to MAHAL to campaign for the upcoming elections. There was an uneasiness among UBC PSS organisers towards the ‘politicisation of an art exhibit’ with her brochures and calling cards – however, is not the art in MAHAL inevitably political too? Ate Crisanta sat on the Isla/Border excited to see herself star on the film “Balikbayan”. Sir Rafael jokingly asked the multinational crowd, “Who among you are ‘Filipinophiles’? And are you one by choice, affiliation, or coercion?” he teased. Non-Filipino guests chuckled in acknowledgment, realising that new identities and ways of relating to other cultural communities have indeed been made possible by MAHAL.

The vignette illustrates the organic and dynamic congregation of a Filipino transnational community in MAHAL brought together by various interests, affiliations and connections which extend not just across Metro Vancouver but also overseas to the Philippines. To help coalesce this community were familial and intimate ties, a shared language, an immigrant community’s political concerns, and academic interests in the Filipino culture. The location of YACTAC gallery in East Vancouver also promoted MAHAL’s accessibility to migrant communities. It cannot be overemphasised how the presence of mass media in MAHAL was also a propelling force to engage the larger Filipino-Canadian community who were not physically present. Journalists behind the “Balitang Vancouver” bi-weekly show on the Shaw Multicultural Channel interviewed Cruz and I and instructed us to speak in Filipino. Just as we communicated to a specific demographic on the Tinig Ng Masa radio programme, we did the same for Balitang Vancouver. Mass media coupled with the Filipino language served to facilitate a heightened consolidation of the Filipino-Canadian community nationwide. Electronic media has indeed “telescoped news into audio-video bytes through the immediacy of their absorption into public discourse” (Appadurai 1996, 3) and has helped expand the scope of community brought together by MAHAL beyond the gallery’s four walls.
Conceptualising MAHAL as a community entertains the possibility for it to also serve as a ‘ritual’ where migratory narratives are told and therefore allowed to stay alive in contemporary discourse. As Appadurai writes, “diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair... bring the force of imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary people... [as] mythographies for new social projects” (1996, 6). MAHAL served a similar process in allowing for new ‘myths’ and ‘rituals’ to become new traditions for a diaspora. Having a physical space to house visual, tactile and audio symbols to narrate transnational movement, lived struggles, including imagined identities and memories of home, bring people together to re-gather as a community. If MAHAL is recreated several more times and moved to changing locations, it can indeed become a tradition for the Filipino community, not excluding Rafael’s ‘Filipinophiles’, in Vancouver. These transient occasions become opportunities for mobile identities to re-gather.

Matthews supports this framing of artistic projects as ‘ritual’ as she views the Filipino immigrant community as ‘nomads’ who do not just need to reflect on their changing subjectivities but most importantly to refuse and resist representations of the Philippines as a utopian homeland or the Filipino society being idealistically harmonious (1998, 126). MAHAL succeeds in this vein given the variety of imaginings it allows for. For example the value of Yu-Chua’s spoken poetry can be likened to the importance of hip hop, as argued by Devitt’s work on the Filipino rapper, Apl.de.ap. of the Black Eyed Peas band (2008). As the group’s fans consume the hit tracks “The APL Song” and “Bebot”, both

MATTHEWS’ use of the word ‘nomad’ is inherently an empowering semiotic. She quotes Teshome H. Gabriel (1990) who considers nomads as peoples rooted in art “to consolidate the community through ritual and performance and collective participation”. Nomads’ intensity in communication and their immediacy of memory allow them to reflect on their lives as “free people” (1998, 115). MAHAL potentially served as an empowering space to interpret Filipinos’ mobility as ‘freedom’ rather than ‘oppressive’. 
written partly in Filipino, they also “recount their own diasporic narratives and develop projects meant to clear a space for Filipino expressive identity in the United States” (Ibid., 108) and in the Philippines. While Yu-Chua’s work appeals to guests interested in hearing spoken narratives in metre and rhyme, others may gravitate towards deconstructed Filipino iconography in Cruz and Deva’s works. Others’ diasporic imaginings may resonate instead with the fixed nature of painted images or visual word play. In these various forms, narratives told among Filipinos about the Philippines and of themselves find nuanced and layered representations. Together, however, they are understood collectively as MAHAL – the many desires which carry the Filipina/o across borders.

**Conclusion**

By virtue of its transnationality, the Filipino community involved in MAHAL also inevitably included individuals of non-Filipino descent attesting to new solidarities formed. Such sodalities, Appadurai writes, “are communities in themselves but always potentially communities for themselves capable of moving from shared imagination to collective action” (8). This relates precisely to UBC PSS’ objective of creating avenues to promote social action through academic and artistic discussions of Philippine related discourses. MAHAL as an exhibit of contemporary art joins the work of others such as *Bayanihan Transition* and *BORDERZONES* and together they underscore the importance of art in remaking communities to explore what transpires in transnational, transborder and transcultural movement and encounters.

Art’s unfaltering willingness to promote discourse through image, spoken word, performance, and its unflinching ability to directly engage with affect and subjectivities, is
undoubtedly important in the continued engagement with lived realities of transnationality. Art is a creative force allowing for the formation of a “community of sentiment, a group that begins to imagine and feels things together” (Appadurai 1996, 8). The power of a community of sentiment lies in their ability to collectively act for social transformation – and whether such activism occurs in their host country or in the Philippines, MAHAL and the UBC PSS continue to render support to the remaking and reimagining of Filipino desires.
APPENDIX:

Fig 2.a: MAHAL icon

Fig 2.b: Ethnographic film, “Balikbayan: Return to the Nation” (2011) by Docot, Walde and Smartt

Fig 3: “Untitled (Head Haunted)”, diptych paintings by Michael Africa

Fig 4: “Ancients”, mixed media installation by Chaya Go
Fig 5: “Overlook”, triptych paintings by Spencer Ocampo

Fig 6: rectified ready made t-shirt, by Francisco-Fernando Granados

Fig 6: “Inheritance” painting by Reva Diana

Fig 8: “Rebulto”, sculpture by Patrick Cruz

Fig 9: “Mahal”, painting by Roberto Jamora
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